

We Must Become Shepherds

Jer. 23: 1-6; Ps. 23; Eph. 2: 13-18; Mk. 6: 30-34

The image of the shepherd is deeply imprinted on the Liturgy of the Word for this Sunday. We encounter this image in the First Reading, the Responsorial Psalm, the Gospel Acclamation, and the Gospel.

What is a shepherd? Usually working alone, a shepherd must care for his sheep and provide for their every need. He ensures that they are in pastures where there is plenty of grass and, if the grass becomes scarce, he moves the sheep to another area. He ensures that they have enough clean, drinking water and he protects them from predators such as wolves. If a sheep goes missing, the shepherd goes out to find it. Perhaps it has gotten caught in some brush or maybe it has fallen into a hole and can't get out. So, the shepherd must save it.

The shepherd carries out his duties 24 hours a day, 7 days a week with no days off. So he must be tireless, dedicated and self-sacrificing. To do less would be to fail.

In the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, God chastises the leaders of the Jewish people. They were not good shepherds. Their selfishness, greed and incompetence have led to the capture and exile of the Jews from their homeland and the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jewish leaders betrayed the trust of the people by not exercising their power and leadership to protect the nation.

But God promises to give the Jews someone who will gather together all the scattered people and bring them back to their homeland. And, in the Gospel Acclamation, Jesus makes it clear that He is that person when He declares: 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me.' In the Second Reading, St. Paul goes further in saying that Jesus gathered together both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus was a shepherd to everyone.

In the Gospel, Jesus shows two necessary qualities of a good shepherd: compassion and self-sacrifice. Even though He wanted to be alone with His disciples, He had compassion for the people who had followed Him and, instead, stopped to teach them. He cared for the people as a shepherd cares for his flock by sacrificing His own needs. The crowd needed food and drink that only He could give them. They needed guidance, protection and healing that only He could provide.

'To whom much is given, much will be required.' This is a much-quoted and often mangled phrase. Many people attribute it to John F. Kennedy but, of course, these are the words of Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (12: 48). These words speak to the notion that we have a responsibility to use our God-given gifts to the benefit of mankind. If we are given positions of power and leadership, we must use those positions for the care and protection of those we lead, even if it means sacrificing ourselves.

The impacts of modern daily life often leave many of us disoriented and wounded. Many of us are in need of someone to comfort us, guide us and to help us heal. When Jesus ascended to heaven, He left us to carry on His mission; to be shepherds, to tend to the flocks entrusted to our care. The flock may begin with our family members and then extend to our friends, neighbours, acquaintances, and even strangers. We must be willing to sacrifice ourselves and our desires to care for others. We must adopt the attitude of a shepherd. Then, we will be truly living as members of Christ's body and preparing ourselves to receive our inheritance, everlasting life in heaven.